

# Disrupting an Epistemology of White Ignorance through writing a Racial Autobiography

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## *Disrupting an Epistemology of White Ignorance through writing a Racial Autobiography*

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### Abstract

*White students who enter university having few experiences engaging with race and white supremacy are likely limited in their ability to perceive and understand structural white ignorance and racial bias towards Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC). As a result, these students and their professors tend to gloss over the insidious ways that hegemonic whiteness is upheld within the university setting. Such failure to critically examine structural whiteness misses opportunities to confront an epistemology of white ignorance, the Racial Contract, and their connection to sustained racial domination. Throughout this article, we argue that students can work towards identifying and disrupting white ignorance by writing a racial autobiography that critically reflects upon students' own experiences of race and racism. We use this assignment to illustrate what it might mean for students to 'become' co-conspirators within and beyond the university setting.*



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## Introduction

Many white<sup>1</sup> students enter university<sup>2</sup> having minimal exposure beyond white neighborhoods and experiences. This is likely due to increased and sustained racial and class segregation within many neighborhoods, as well as the ongoing impacts of settler colonialism throughout countries such as the United States and Aotearoa New Zealand (e.g. Apple & Beane, 2007; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Picower, 2013; Picower & Mayorga, 2016; Tatem, 2003; Stewart, 2020; Bécars, Cormack & Harris, 2013). As a result, many students have few opportunities to gain a critical understanding of race, likely limiting their ability to perceive racial bias towards Black and Students of Color (BIPOC<sup>3</sup>). These predispositions can perpetuate a color-blind ideology and demonstration of racial apathy in traditionally white spaces (Jayakumar & Adamian, 2017). Building on this premise, we look to the metaphor of the “walls of whiteness” (Brunsma, Brown & Placier, 2012) as it represents a form of protection from proactively unsettling and challenging whiteness within university classroom communities. As Brunsma, Brown and Placier (2012) state:

Our white students believe the system is already just and do not actually see a system at all; they see a set of ideas that have been in place throughout the history of this nation and a set of relationless individuals who act out these historical ideas from their self-interest [...] part of this stems from their understanding of rights as political and civil and not social, cultural and economic, and the ideology of individualism. (p. 731)

Not surprisingly, students may then perceive white supremacy as a distant concept as opposed to one that they may actively interrogate and understand its insidious and covert nature.

It is vital to contextualize and conceptualize the ways whiteness manifests locally, nationally, and globally. Because this article draws on experiences and scholarship from the United States and Aotearoa, we provide context and definitions when necessary, particularly within our discussion of Aotearoa, so that readers can understand the nuanced ways that we situate our discussion of whiteness both in our classroom communities and in wider national and global contexts.

## Whiteness in Aotearoa New Zealand

Though a detailed history of whiteness in Aotearoa New Zealand is beyond the scope of this article, it is important to briefly contextualize it in Aotearoa, the country in which we write this article. Whiteness is an ideology that positions white people, systems, experiences and histories as the “default” and/or norm. As Elers and Jayan (2020) note, “[W]hiteness continues to mark itself as an invisible standard through which racialized others are measured” (pp. 238-239). Whiteness, through the very act of being ‘unseen’ itself, can silence and erase BIPOC experiences and worldviews, thereby enabling white supremacy. This process is evident in Aotearoa, whereby

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<sup>1</sup> We use the term “white” to denote a racial identity, while “whiteness” refers to an ideology that stratifies humans and embodies racial power (Bonilla-Silva, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> “University” is used in this article to broadly describe higher education settings. Our intention is not to homogenize universities, but to challenge those that fail to critique whiteness. We recognize and build on the work done in historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and traditionally white institutions (TWIs) that challenge whiteness and white supremacy.

<sup>3</sup> In this context we use BIPOC to acknowledge the racial and ethnic diversity within marginalized communities.

whiteness is upheld by the enduring impacts of European colonization of Māori, the indigenous peoples of Aotearoa. Since the 19th century, the ways that British colonizers positioned Anglo-centric ideals and knowledge in Aotearoa as superior to tikanga me te ao Māori (Māori culture and worldview) forced many Māori to assimilate to Pākehā<sup>4</sup> values, thus dispossessing them of land, culture and language (Awatare, 1984; Came-Friar et al., 2019). Subsequent breaches of Te Tiriti o Waitangi, (the Treaty of Waitangi; the founding document between Māori and the British Crown in Aotearoa),<sup>5</sup> and a mis-remembering of the country's history of colonization (Jackson, 2019), continue to have negative effects on Māori communities and other communities of color. Understanding the operations of whiteness and racism in Aotearoa can help us to make sense of the inequities between Māori and Pākehā that are evident across social determinants (Bécares, Cormack & Harris, 2013; Harris et al., 2006).

Although the education systems in Aotearoa are increasingly recognizing race as a systemic construct that can be 'untaught,' (e.g. Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2021; Ministry of Education, 2022) whiteness still manifests in inequitable outcomes between Māori and Pākehā students, as well as other minoritized ethnic groups. For example, whiteness operates in teachers' deficit framing of Māori students' academic achievement (Bishop et al., 2003), and through the greater educational capital and mobility Pākehā middle-class students tend to have due to historic privilege (Borell, Moewaka Barnes & McCreanor, 2018). Students who learn in education systems that center Pākehā worldviews generally have fewer opportunities to learn in culturally responsive environments; consequently, these systems reinforce values and attitudes that center whiteness and settler colonialism.

Our collective observations and experiences, from living in Aotearoa and the United States of America respectively, suggest that there is a general discomfort among people when talking about race and white supremacy in the context of Aotearoa and its history. For example, Stewart (2020) observes that "[R]acism" is a dirty word and a grave insult in Aotearoa New Zealand, and many Pākehā react with anger if anyone raises the question of racism. In an interview in June 2021, Aotearoa's then-Education Minister responded to a question about proposed secondary school curriculum changes by claiming that the term white privilege "generates a reaction from people that actually puts up a barrier to them genuinely engaging in a conversation about power imbalance" (Satherly, 2021). We presume people in Aotearoa generally avoid using terms such as 'white privilege' and race, as they are considered confrontational and divisive, thus using 'ethnicity' instead. However, the ways people use and relate to these terms undoubtedly differ depending on individuals' racial standpoint and positionality.

### **Standpoint, Positionality, and Critical Self-reflexivity**

Engaging with standpoint, positionality, and critical self-reflexivity are a vital part of unsettling and challenging white supremacy. The importance of social locations such as race, class, gender, and sexuality shape people's lives and have different, often oppositional standings, regarding the ways one experiences and comes to understand the world (Collins, 2000). By locating oneself within this manner, there is a deliberate awareness that the world looks and is experienced differently depending on one's standpoint and positionality. Within this perspective, we share and reflect upon our own racial standpoints and positionality, as they are both intimately

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<sup>4</sup> Pākehā is the Māori word for white New Zealanders of European descent.

<sup>5</sup> For more information about Te Tiriti o Waitangi, see *Te Tiriti o Waitangi* (Orange, 2012)

connected to the how we interrogate, unpack, and challenge white supremacy. The first author identifies as white, European- Jewish-American, university educated, cisgender, able-bodied, middle-class, heterosexual female. The second author identifies as Pākehā, German, transmasculine, non-disabled, university-educated, and middle-class. Lather (1991) reminds us of the importance of locating our social identities when stating that:

Strategically, reflexive practice is privileged as the site where we can learn how to turn critical thought into emancipatory action. This entails a reflexivity where we learn to attend to the politics of what we do and do not do at a practical level (p.13).

To elaborate, racial standpoint often exists in opposition to dominant cultural systems such as whiteness as an ideology, white supremacy, and hegemonic epistemologies (Au, 2012; Collins, 2000; Kinefuchi & Orbe, 2008). Such vantage points are a result of one's field of experience (or social location) and are often used to better understand how people come to see and experience the world differently. Individuals within a marginalized or minoritized identity (self-identified or ascribed) as well as those with a white racial identity are influenced by how they understand and experience the world around them. Furthermore, racial standpoint refers to more than social location, experience, or perspective; it encompasses a critical and oppositional understanding for how life is shaped by larger social and political forces. Importantly, racial standpoints are dialectic and fundamentally collective.

Positionality, on the other hand, refers to proximity (attached or detached) within which people interact and understand the world. Positionality might include opinions, values, beliefs, and the way individual identity and affiliations one has are positioned by others (Kinefuchi and Orbe, 2008). For example, two individuals from the same racial group may acknowledge their racial location, but they may differ in their positionality and contextual focus.

Further connecting standpoint and positionality is the concept of a double image. Seidl and Hancock (2011) explain a double image as providing white people with insight into the images they project in cross-raced encounters. It asks whites to anticipate the ways that BIPOC might perceive some of their behaviors, whilst working to understand the emotions that these might raise. According to Seidl and Hancock (2011) this is not an easy place to come to in order to truly engage in naming and challenging white supremacy. White people must work toward a development of an identity that includes the varied ways that they are perceived as white.

By critically reflecting upon one's experiences and actions, there is an awareness of either reinforcing or challenging power. Jayakumar and Adamian (2017) note that even within white students' ability to understand and align with racially progressive and nuanced understandings of structural racism and whiteness, they still disconnect from a critical analysis of their own positionality, experiences and/or actions. Thus, the importance of connecting standpoint and positionality to critical self-reflexivity and dialectic engagement cannot be understated, as both are a vital step toward understanding *why* we must seek to actively resist and challenge the individual liberties of liberalism, omnipresent inequity and oppression, and a hegemonic culture of white supremacy. Unfortunately, much of university education does not offer such engagement. Instead, it reinforces the status quo of silence and hegemony, which results in a reinforcement of institutionalized whiteness and racial domination.

## **Contextualizing the White University**

Although argued over twenty years ago, McIntyre's (2002) following statement still resonates: "Students are accustomed to a culture of niceness that often suffocates critique in many classrooms and institutions of higher learning [...] it is a significant barrier to developing a discourse that critically explores the various dimensions of whiteness" (p. 44). Within this superficial context, students are not asked to actively consider their own culpability (both intentionally or unintentionally) for maintaining and upholding white supremacy and racial domination. In as much, situating the impact and power of whiteness is both contextually and conceptually specific. However, the manner we present the philosophical and ontological understandings of whiteness and education are similar in both the US and Aotearoa, thus our general framing and discussion of the 'white university.' As Jayakumar and Adamian (2017) argue:

By absolving whites as beneficiaries of racism, colorblind frames notably shield whites from acknowledging institutional racism and white privilege. In adhering to the false notion that we live in a colorblind society, whites are protected from feeling discomfort, shame, or personal responsibility for the realities of racism. (p. 915)

Through this glossing over of the subversive ways that white supremacy works, racial awareness within the university context is accommodated instead of challenging structures of power that have the potential to alter the larger system of racism and racial ideology (Burke, 2017).

The university further sustains white ignorance by upholding an ideology of neoliberal racism that conceptualizes education through a white lens and framework (de Saxe, 2021). In as much, Bargh (2007) iterates "neoliberalism demonstrates a translation of many older colonial beliefs, once expressed explicitly, now expressed implicitly, into language and practices which are far more covert about their civilizing mission" (p.13). A racist neoliberal ideology seeks to colonize, suppress, and reinforce the fear that any form of critical thinking within the university might uncover racism, as well as challenge the status quo of complacency and individualism. The hegemonic and colonizing structures of the university prioritize self-meritocracy by denying the workings of privilege in favor of discourses of merit and blame (Bell, 2020). These ideologies and practices within the university are not new nor are they accidental.

Notably, there is a connective tissue within universities that is continually being forged between ideologies, philosophies, and the formation of policies and practices (Picower & Mayorga, 2015). This must be understood as an amalgamation of the insidious ways of thinking about the world that directly interconnect and dehumanize elements of race, class, gender, among other identifiers. Within such thinking, the university monitors humanity, delegitimizes community, whilst demeaning the importance of the public good (Giroux, 2001, 2012). As a result, too many students leave the university unprepared to challenge the many facets of white supremacy, both within education and society. In fact, so little attention is paid to directly challenging whiteness and racism that many students can spend their entire tenure at university sidestepping such content altogether.

Building on this premise, we ask the following questions: What needs to change within a university classroom community to disrupt the cycle of white ignorance? How can professors and students (in both predominately white and racially diverse classrooms) tangibly work within a theoretical framework that aims to challenge hegemonic whiteness both within and beyond the

university? As we engage with these questions, we unpack the insidious ways that an ideology of whiteness and racial domination are upheld within the philosophies and pedagogies of the university classroom, ultimately reinforcing and sustaining white ignorance.

### **An Epistemology of White Ignorance and the Racial Contract**

To understand the structures and belief systems that maintain students' propensity to ignore and normalize whiteness, and the implications of their complicity in such systems, we turn to an epistemology of white ignorance and the Racial Contract (Applebaum, 2019; Mills, 2007; Yancy, 2012). Within an educational context, understanding these concepts can help white students see how entrenched and constructed whiteness is, both historically and within contemporary pedagogical spaces. Although often perpetuated unintentionally, upon close inspection it becomes clear that by ignoring the power of 'knowing', members of the dominant group have a vested interest in 'not knowing'." This point is best articulated by Applebaum (2015) who states "[T]he refusal to know allows the systematically privileged to misunderstand and misinterpret the world" (p. 34). This misinterpretation upholds the status quo by stratifying, privileging, and denoting whiteness as invisible. Most importantly, an epistemology of white ignorance is maintained by racist structures that shield white people from considering their complicity in hegemonic whiteness.

On the other hand, when whiteness is interrogated, the binary that often frames conversations about race (i.e. racist/not-racist) becomes more nuanced. Mills (1997) argues that we must seek to develop an understanding of the cognitive process that typically produces false beliefs. He states, "the aim is to understand how certain social structures tend to promote these crucially flawed processes, how to personally extricate oneself from them, and to do one's part in undermining them in the broader cognitive sphere" (p.23). Within this context, students can then begin to question seemingly benign processes and practices that are often framed as color-blind and merit-based.

For example, by teasing apart structural whiteness within the university context, students can aim for a wider and more nuanced lens in which to consider how an ideology and normalization of whiteness trickles down to aspects of the university culture such as course options, syllabi, hiring decisions and assessments. Most important, these 'new' understandings often lead students to experience cognitive dissonance, which if held onto and teased apart, can move whites into a space of white racial consciousness that asks them to unpack how they make sense of their own racial selves and their earned/unearned status.

Yancy (2012) further complicates an epistemology of white ignorance by asking to whom whiteness is invisible. He returns white people to the problem of whiteness by shouting "Look, a white!" This proclamation is an intentional flipping of the script of Fanon's experience of a little white boy 'seeing' him and shouting, "Look, a Negro!" (Fanon, 1967). Fanon feels the impact of the collective white gaze. In this situation, he becomes a dreaded object, a thing of fear, a frightening and ominous presence. This pointing is the power of racial gesturing and an expression that calls forth an entire white racist worldview. Within this worldview, whites have the capacity to live anonymously, to go unmarked and unnamed, essentially becoming normalized and hegemonic. Whiteness seamlessly shifts into a configuration of practices and meanings that reinforce the dominant position in a particular racial formation, successfully occupying the empty space of "normality" in our structure (Lewis, 2004).

These ideas of white ignorance are further understood through examining the Racial Contract (Mills, 1997, 2015), which explicates how such behavior is both insidious and a demonstration of protection and fear. While the Contract is clearly false as a literal account, it can be regarded as an evocative figure for expressing two basic truths, one descriptive and one normative: that society is a human construct (not an organic growth, or a supernatural creation) and that human beings have an equality in the pre-social state of nature that should be preserved in the socio-political institutions they create once they leave it. Leonardo (2015) draws on Mills' interpretation and his analysis of the Racial Contract to situate its relevance within the field of education, as education and the Racial Contract are intimately connected; they are mutually inclusive. Mills (1997) states that:

The Racial Contract seeks to account for the way things are and how they came to be that way - the descriptive - as well as the way they should be - the normative [...] the general purpose of the Contract is always the differential privileging of the whites as a group with respect to the nonwhites as a group, the exploitation of their bodies, land, and resources, and the denial of equal socioeconomic opportunities to them. (as cited within Leonardo, 2015, pp. 10-11)

Epistemologically, the Racial Contract does not produce cognitive dissonance, for those with power and privilege who benefit from the Contract, because it is so rooted in a hegemonic understanding of a world steeped in normalizing whiteness (de Saxe, 2021). As Burke (2017) argues, "when we study individuals, we must consider *how* (emphasis added) they make meaning of the worlds that surround them, and also the ways that activity based on that meaning may work in the service of larger oppressive or liberatory practices, where material consequences are produced" (p. 859). Power works through knowing and unknowing to maintain systems of social injustice. Through this, students can consider and meditate upon content that often seems intangible. In situating an epistemology of white ignorance and the Racial Contract as a conceptual and theoretical framework, students can more readily complicate the dichotomy of 'theory' and 'practice' which is commonly reproduced in university contexts (Freire, 1974).

Though university settings are typically structured in such a way that perpetuates the invisibility of whiteness, they can also be conceptualized as a site of resistance if education is understood as the practice of freedom (hooks, 1994). The university is a unique environment in which to disrupt white ignorance, both within and beyond the university as it can provide students with a space to undermine the 'walls' that uphold white ignorance and white supremacy. To address this aversion and utilize the university as a site of resistance, we work to create a classroom environment that allows students to complicate and unsettle some ideas and experiences that can prove challenging and confrontational, yet powerful and provocative for educational and societal transformation.

### **Creating a Dialogic and Dialectic Classroom Community**

One of the foundational principles of engaging in conversations around race and whiteness in the classroom setting is what Watson (2018) discusses in her article, *Staying in the Conversation*. She argues for creating a classroom environment that welcomes honesty, disagreement, and respect. This is imperative, as the content that we ask our students (and ourselves) to engage with goes beyond simplistic notions of whiteness and race. Accordingly, we draw on Watson (2018) who underscores the importance of rapt listening, giving of self, and being fully present when



unpacking one's own racial standpoint and racialized experiences. We are aware that difficult emotions may arise throughout this process, and work to create a 'safe space' for productive conversations. Importantly, we echo Watson (2018) who states:

By 'safe,' I don't mean a place where folks won't get offended, or angry, or feel pain. I mean safe enough to feel all of these emotions and more, but still want to come back because the learning is that good and productive. (p. 43)

Like the blurred lines between theory and practice, self-reflexivity and the commitment to difficult conversations do not only happen within the bounds of the university, nor are they definitive acts. We continually remind students that developing a racial consciousness is a lifelong process. Challenging whiteness and racial injustice through acts such as attending marches, posting on social media and taking courses on race and racism, though part of a larger movement towards anti-racism and challenging white supremacy, can in themselves be seen as performative or self-congratulatory. We urge students to keep this in mind when not only learning about the racial contract and the epistemology of ignorance, but through their self-reflexivity when writing their racial autobiographies.

With this in mind, we look to the tenets of cultural humility when asking students to engage with the course content and write their racial autobiographies. Cultural humility calls on all of us to embrace critical self-reflexivity and lifelong learning, institutional accountability, and recognizing and changing power imbalances (Tervalon and Murray-Garcia, 1998). In other words, active and generous learning and listening, are ongoing practices that require us to situate our racial standpoints *within* conversations around race and whiteness, rather than seeing ourselves as separate from these discourses.

### **Disrupting White Ignorance through writing a Racial Autobiography**

We now turn to one way that students may apply these concepts to make sense of their lived experience of whiteness and racial identity. The racial autobiography assignment we discuss in this article is part of a second-year sociology course in a large, public university in Aotearoa. Again, we draw on Watson's (2018) article in which she assigns a racial autobiography assignment for her teacher education students. Watson states, "who we are influences how we form relationships and understand others. In this assignment, I hope you will learn more about your beliefs and assumptions, where these assumptions come from, and how these assumptions may influence your behavior" (p. 42). Although the assignment draws on tenets within the methodology of autoethnography, (Chavez, 2012) we choose to title it 'racial autobiography,' as it coincides with both the purposes and intentions of the assignment.

There are no prerequisites to take this course, which has been taught three times between 2019 and 2022, but most students who enroll are sociology majors. We also have students from criminology, anthropology, law, social policy, as well as other social science disciplines. Students are aware of the content and subject matter of the course per the course description, so those who enroll tend to have a commitment to the structures and requirements of the course, as well as challenging themselves with difficult discussions about race and white supremacy.

There are roughly 60 students within each course cohort. Like many courses within the sociology program at our university, most students self-identify as female and Pākehā/white. We have a small number of students who self-identify as Māori, Pasifika, Southeast Asian, South

Asian, as well as other Black, Indigenous and Students of Color, but these numbers tend to be roughly one-third of the total number of students in the course. We also have students who self-identify as mixed-race or bi-racial, the majority of whom have one parent who is European/Pākehā/white. Some students are also studying as part of an exchange from overseas universities. Additionally, we have a few students who are the first member of their family to attend university. Finally, because we are a large public university, there is a wide range of socioeconomic levels amongst the student population.

We present these demographics in a general manner to respect student anonymity and confidentiality. Although the numbers are approximated, they provide a general overview of the racial, gender, and class makeup of the course we discuss. These identifiers are a vital component of the racial autobiography assignment, as students are asked to consider how their standpoint and positionality impact their understanding and engagement with the theoretical concepts presented throughout the course.

The tutorials in this course, too, are an important component for developing the racial autobiography, as they provide opportunities for students and tutors to discuss their ideas in smaller groups. This course meets for a two-hour lecture once a week for 12 weeks. Students also attend a weekly 50-minute tutorial, which provides a more intimate (usually 15 students) environment for them to unpack the course content. In these settings, we too were able to discuss our own racialized experiences as educators through conversations with students. For example, one of the authors shared in tutorial how they might apply the notion of an epistemology of white ignorance to their neighborhood school that was described in racially coded ways. The other author shared how in high school, Advanced Placement (AP) and honors classes tended to be dominated by white students, reinforcing elements of the Racial Contract.

The racial autobiography assignment is due week six of the term and comes at the end of five intense weeks of learning critical theories on race and white supremacy. The assignment is broken up into two parts: 1) students critically self-reflect upon a particular experience and/or moment where they engaged with race (either directly or indirectly); and 2) students analyze this moment through the theoretical lens and frameworks of an epistemology of white ignorance (Applebaum, 2019; Mills, 2007, 2015) and the Racial Contract (Mills, 2007, 2015). As previously stated, a key element of this assignment includes reflecting upon one's standpoint and positionality, noting how interconnected and contextually specific they are when challenging knowledge, power and hegemonic thinking and learning. In the following discussion, we reflect upon some of the observations and analyses from both cohorts of students and their racial autobiography assignments.

For their racial autobiographies, we ask students to think of a moment in their lives in where they considered race. For example, *What ideas did you grow up with regarding race? What is the most important image you've seen, or encounter you've had, regarding race? What was your first awareness of your race or ethnicity?* After having reflected upon two iterations of this assignment, we have observed some commonalities within students' chosen moments and how they applied their racial standpoint and experience within systems that uphold, maintain, and reinforce racial stratification and hegemonic whiteness.

Several students reflected upon their experiences of learning through a Pākehā-centric education system in Aotearoa. The different ways Māori and Pākehā students navigated these tensions of living in a settler-colonial country that centres colonial narratives (Kidman, 2019), yet

has an obligation to honour Te Tiriti o Waitangi, and specifically in their racial autobiographies indicated their ongoing journeys of understanding their racialized selves situated in their educational environments. For some students, this was the first time they had considered the operation of race and whiteness in their education, whereas for other students, their racial awareness has always informed how they understand and navigate education.

Some students chose to reflect upon their university application experience, initially seeing their acceptance or rejection purely based on an individual system of merit and hard work (Bargh, 2007). However, after unpacking their narrative within an epistemology of white ignorance, they came to understand how the system is designed and maintained within a structure of normalizing and privileging whiteness as it relates to ‘success’. During this process, students began to make sense of how their racial standpoints, personal narratives, and actions either uphold or challenge power. Throughout this process, students grappled with the ways subjectivity is bound to the structural, and therefore holds the potential for transformation.

Our observations suggest that Pākehā/white and BIPOC students engage with an epistemology of white ignorance and the Racial Contract in different ways. For example, many BIPOC students recognize that what they personally experience is legitimized through a theoretical framework of white ignorance, which echoes hooks’ (1994) notion that theory is liberatory. For example, by drawing on critical theories on race, students can see and consider the ways they have been systematically disadvantaged and marginalized because of their racial identity. Additionally, students shared that by having the freedom to consider themselves in a racialized light, they were better able to reflect and legitimize thoughts they have always had.

Conversely, for many Pākehā/white students, learning about an epistemology of white ignorance and the Racial Contract provide them with tools to better understand previously unexamined behaviors. Students share that by not recognizing their white racial identity, they absolve themselves as racial beings, essentially normalizing whiteness. They also come to see and recognize that their perceived absence of race is in fact a racial experience. This process can be quite confronting for white students as it opens up a space to think about how and why their actions reinforce and normalize structures of whiteness, so that they can work towards exposing and undermining it within their own lives. We hope that the process allows white students to develop a more nuanced perspective on whiteness, noting how this has enabled access to certain aspects of society—how students both see their own, and how other people view their white racial identity.

### **Discussion: Towards a Co-Conspiratorial Framework**

To reiterate, for most white university students, talking about whiteness and white supremacy is often accompanied by feelings of guilt, shame, and anger, as such discussions are often solely focused on historical acts, individual behaviors, and disconnected experiences. Notably, Maddison (2011, as cited within Norris, 2019) argues for the importance of distinguishing healthy white guilt from unhealthy white guilt, as the former can lead to action and transformation, while the latter often results in paralysis. As students reflected on their racial autobiographies, it became apparent that many found the process therapeutic, cathartic, yet startling and confronting; it had pushed them to think about issues they had not thought of previously, or that they had chosen to not think about as it was too confronting and uncomfortable. At the same time, many viewed the assignment as a catalyst for an ongoing process of (un)learning and challenging whiteness. The assignment gave white students a way to talk to their family and friends about race and whiteness,

as well as unpack the assumptions, experiences, and ideas they had previously held about their education and identities.

Students who shared that they would use this process to analyze situations in everyday life, embody what Black scholars and activists call ‘co-conspiratorship’, a concept that recognizes that dismantling racist structures requires white people to de-center whiteness and fight with BIPOC communities towards racial justice, rather than supporting them from the ‘sidelines’ as the term allyship often suggests (Knittel, 2018; C-Span, 2019). There is growing consensus among BIPOC activists that allyship, both as an action and an identity, has become largely performative; as Kluttz, Walker and Walter (2020) argue, dominant discourses of allyship “lull[s] us into a false notion of having ‘achieved’ a status that does not invite continued questioning and constant un-settling” (p. 53). Consequently, the power to achieve sustained, structural transformation through acts of allyship become lost (Petersen-Smith & Bean, 2015). This notion is best summarized by Black Lives Matter co-founder, Alicia Garza (Move to End Violence, 2016), who states:

Co-conspiracy is about what we do in action, not just in language. It is about moving through guilt and shame and recognizing that we did not create none of this stuff. And so what we are taking responsibility for is the power that we hold to transform our conditions. (para. 5)

A central aim of being a co-conspirator is to continually disrupt the cycle of white ignorance that enables whiteness to remain invisible. It is important for white students and professors to understand the (un)learning that happens within the classroom not as a way of achieving an ally identity, but rather, to perceive the university as a space to begin and reiterate processes of challenging white ignorance within and beyond educational institutions.

We recognize and consider our privilege in being able to speak and teach about this content with fewer ramifications and risks as they relate to us experiencing epistemic injustice (Berenstein, 2016, Dotson, 2011, 2014; Fricker, 2007). We also realize the limits to what we can and cannot speak about when reflecting on and challenging white supremacy and racial domination. With this in mind, we envision a co-conspiratorial framework as something that has the potential to create a space for actively undermining the power imbalances and racist structures that are too often upheld rather than directly confronted and challenged.

The processes of learning and unlearning whiteness in the classroom should not be confined to a binary academia/activist framework, but instead, located at the intersections of identity, physical, and intellectual spaces throughout society, including within the university. The iterative skills students and professors build through embodying a co-conspiratorial role within the classroom community enable a shared understanding for the various pedagogical and activist spaces they move through are inextricably linked and in constant dialogue with each other. This racial autobiography assignment is just one way that students may learn to develop a deeper and more nuanced understanding of white supremacy and race, working to expose and challenge white ignorance within society.

## **Conclusion**

Identifying and disrupting white ignorance and white supremacy require a comprehensive understanding of the explicit and implicit ways that unexamined whiteness reinforces the inherent oppression found within educational institutions and communities. Talking about whiteness in a

surfaced manner, and/or focusing too much on white benevolence often centers whiteness by focusing on personal behaviors (Applebaum, 2015). This is of course, not to excuse individual actions, but rather provide an awareness of the interplay between the structural ways in which white supremacy manifests.

Throughout this article, we have focused our analysis within the duration of three cohorts of students and their experiences. Future research may benefit from understanding how assignments such as the racial autobiography impact students' analysis of race and ethnicity beyond their time in academia. We hope that through applying theories such as an epistemology of white ignorance and the Racial Contract to lived experiences, students and professors may have an opportunity to see the potentialities that can arise from critically self-reflecting on their experiences of race and racism. It is therefore our responsibility, as professors, students, and members of our communities, to provide ways of interrogating and undermining an ideology of whiteness and white supremacy that continue to reinforce the systems of power and marginalization. In our contemporary moment, we are living in a time where we must wholeheartedly ground ourselves within a democratic, revolutionary, and emancipatory existence.

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